

That Vision Thing

Ironically enough, I remember the moment clearly. It was about five years ago now, when I looked up from the car and realized I couldn't see. I had been staring at my computer a lot, and reading books when I wasn't doing that, so I didn't notice much, but that day, riding in the car, I looked up and realized I couldn't read the street sign. I definitely used to be able to read that sign, but there it was, big and bright and green along the highway, and all I could make out was a blur. I had gone blind.

Legally blind, as I learned yesterday. My vision is below the legal threshold in the US for legal blindness. (Far below, as far as I can tell, but the eye exam chart doesn't really make fine-grained distinctions at that level.) And yet, for five years, this never really bothered me. I never wore glasses for more than an hour, I squinted hard enough to pass the vision test at the DMV, I sat close to blackboards and listened carefully.

I tried a couple things to improve my eyesight, but nothing very seriously. I tried, but it never seemed important enough to warrant the effort. And so I walked thru life, legally blind. I didn't really notice.

My roommate, Quinn, has been nagging me about this. She wants me to get LASIK, I think largely because it involves lasers. But finally the other day I took some action and went to the optometrist.

You know those eye charts you see sometimes? The ones that famously start with E at the top and then the letters get smaller and smaller? I couldn't read the E. When I looked up at it, all I saw was a vague blur. So they gave me contacts.

Contacts are an odd thing. They're almost invisible, malleable little things that you can't see once they're stuck on your eye. One minute, you're living a Monet-like existence of a world blurred, then tap your eye and suddenly, invisibly, everything is clear.

I had no idea the world really looked like this, with such infinite clarity. It looks like a modernist photo or a hyperreal film, everything in focus everywhere. Everyone kept saying "oh, do you see the leaves now?" but the first thing I saw was not the leaves but the people. People, individuated, each with brilliant faces and expressions at gaits, the sun streaming down upon them. I couldn't help but smile. It's much harder being a misanthrope when you can see people's faces.

Then came the signs, the signs with messages I could read from a distance. No longer would I have to carefully count my stops on the subway because I couldn't read the station signs. And then the buildings, their edges no longer fuzzy like clouds but hard and harsh and magnificent.

I no longer feared myself, formerly this vague visage in the mirror that I had to look away from. Now in the mirror I could see my face, and even thought it looked good.

The resolution on my cameraphone suddenly seems insufficient. The crumbs and dirt in our apartment that previously drove my roommate crazy are now visible enough to drive me crazy too. I can look people in the eye and smile and see them smile back. I can see the contours of their faces. When I look up at night I can see the things in my room, even when the lights are off.

My eyes are open and I can now experience the beauty that's been more than a few feet in front of my nose.

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